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ABSTRACT

Distance education's use of the instructional systems design model has been challenged by critics who suggest that the learner is passive and learning is superficial. A suggestion is that distance education should be structured so that learners assume a more active role in the development and use of autonomous and self-directed learning strategies. The learner would be active making decisions about the learning process. This interactive learning process reflects a unique developmental journey; adult learners develop skills, knowledge, and attitudes as they engage in increasingly advanced forms of self-direction. To create learner autonomy and self-direction, a design model of teaching/learning in distance education is proposed that suggests a continuum of three stages, moving from low autonomy and self-directedness in learners in Stage 1 to stimulating varied design models of actions and thinking through moderate instructor dominance and selected student autonomy and self-directed actions in stage 2. This stage would provide moderated group discussions and projects through the tutelage of the instructor. In Stage 3 of high student autonomy and low instructor dominance, the learner would actively design the learning experience. Courses and learning experiences that maximize learner dominance would be offered. (YLB)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF ADULT LEARNER AUTONOMY AND SELF-DIRECTEDNESS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education has developed important methodologies and designs based in the instructional systems design (ISD) model. This curriculum and instructional model provides precise, systematic examination of content and skills. It features pre and post assessments of learning, validation of outcomes, and a defined journey of instruction towards those ends.

Recent adult learning theory has come to challenge the exclusive use of the instructional systems design model in instructional settings. Many critics have suggested that within this model the learner is a passive linear learner with the result that learning is superficial or limited to surface information processing. As suggested by Moore (1986, p.13), "schools and universities are generally neglectful of **learning** programs, and preoccupied with sustaining.....teaching and the work of professional teachers." Distance education and open learning programs are predominantly designed for students to be passive recipients of "pre-packaged past knowledge". One of the typical arguments is that "students who enroll in formal programs of distance education, that is established courses, do not want flexibility of 'learner choice' in materials. They want unambiguous instruction and step-by-step directions; they want clear objectives and direct routes to achieving them" (Leslie, 1987).

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Adult learning and instructional theory suggest that the student should be an active participant in the design and execution of the learning process. The adult student should engage in the development of meaningful and relevant learning with in-depth information processing and autonomous self learning. In particular, learning by adult students should be an interactive constructive process of meaning; learning strategies should reflect global, interactive, and meta-cognitive actions. Most current distance education courses do not view learning from that perspective. Rather they focus upon the demonstration of known facts in isolation, often with limited retention and retrieval rates for the long duration. We suggest that the particular designs of distance education should be structured so that the learners assume a more active role in the development and use of autonomous and self-directed learning strategies. We believe that helping the learner develop the ability to be self-directed in his or her own educational experiences is conducive to interactive meaning construction and in the development of learning-how-to-learn skills; it creates an environment for meaningful and relevant learning with in-depth information processing and autonomous self learning. Thus, the learner is active within "self-direction" by engaging in executive decision-making (action control) of the learning process. This interactive learning process and the concomitant self-direction in learning has four key aspects: personal autonomy, self-management (willingness and capacity to conduct one's own education), learner-control (mode for organizing

instruction in formal settings), and autodidaxy (noninstitutional pursuits of learning opportunities in the "natural societal setting") (Candy, 1991). This interactive learning process within distance learning programs features adult learners as capable of initiating and directing their own learning, given specific guidance and parameters. More importantly, quality learning occurs from learner involvement and active participation with deep information processing of meanings, connecting topics and skills to the metacognitive world of the learner.

The interactive learning process is not a static or unidimensional state for the learner. It reflects a unique developmental journey; adult learners "develop" the skills, knowledge, and attitudes as they engage in increasingly advanced forms of self-direction. The maturation of self-directed learning should be viewed along a developmental continuum. In this case, we will be describing a continuum of teaching and instructional designs in distance education and open learning environments which fosters increased self-directedness and autonomy. But we realize this continuum also undergirds another continuum of learner abilities and skills, reflecting the many personal and historical factors of the learner. Each learner brings to the learning experience varied psychological and cultural factors, such as individual learning styles, the goals for involvement in learning, expectations and motivations, educational history and beliefs of learning, and maturity. For example, field-dependent learners may be different from field-independent learners in that "field

dependents prefer relatively greater amounts of external structure, direction, and feedback" (Smith, 1982, p.62). Adults who are highly motivated about learning a certain subject matter and are more mentally mature may be more capable of exercising control over dimensions of the distance teaching/learning situation than those who are not. Similarly, a person who is engaged in distance education only for the purpose of obtaining some certification is less involved in learning as a meaningful experience and therefore is on the lower end of the learners' self-directedness continuum. From another perspective, research in self-directed learning and learner autonomy has demonstrated that many adult students enter learning environments with expectations of "past schooling", of a passive engagement in instructional courses. These students often confine learning to a socialized student role directed by the instructor and the instructional process. Friere eloquently speaks to these concerns as "banking education". Recent research on adult undergraduates (Kasworm, 1991) clearly demonstrates that adult undergraduate students value learning through the student role and performing in that passive teacher-student mode. Unfortunately the focus of these students is on "learning the student role", with peripheral concern for the actual utility and efficacy of the course content and skill. When these students refocus towards learning the application and relevancy of the course content, they move into a more autonomous and self-directed state in their learning. This emphasis upon the student role is also supported through recent research on the nature of expertise,

of expert versus novice learners; this research suggests that many students often view themselves as novices in the learning experience. They are more concerned about learning the fundamentals towards becoming good students, rather than the metacognitive development of learning skills. As students develop the skills of good learners, they move into a more expertise status and take the risks of autonomy and self-directedness.

We recognize that self-directedness in learning is also a socio-cultural reflection. In many societies in which learning is predominantly viewed as following expert-developed programs and pursuing knowledge from professionally certified teachers, self-direction in learning is very often discouraged. However, we argue that distance education and open learning programs should develop more sophisticated and advanced instructional designs to incorporate autonomy and self-direction and to focus on interactive learning designs for their adult learners. We should be providing a developmental journey for our adult learners to move beyond the passive, novice state of learning.

It is time for distance education and opening learning agencies to shift toward a more sophisticated and more global interactive process of learning strategies. We suggest that programs and agencies consider the development of learner autonomy and self-direction within their programs.

Actions to Support Learner Autonomy and Self-directedness

To create learner autonomy and self-directedness, we present a design model of teaching/learning in distance education **(Note**

Figure One). This model suggests a continuum of three stages moving from low autonomy and self-directedness in learners (Stage One), to Stage Two with moderate interaction with the development of trust and skills in self-direction and autonomy beyond instructor control and expertise. The final stage (Stage Three) features low instructional control by the teacher, active collaboration and facilitation between the teacher as a mentor and the adult learner, and high learner autonomy and self-directedness supported and encouraged in the course. The model provides guidance for instructional designers, distance education program personnel and instructors. The model suggests that distance education and open learning experiences can be designed to support the development of adult learners from the first stage with high instructor dominance towards the third stage with high student dominance in the teaching and learning process.

Past research has established that adults do not enter into instructional environments at the same stage. However, several field studies have reported that most adult learners enter into new and stressful situations with a preference for Stage One - High Instructor Dominance, Low Student autonomy. This stage provides security, clarity, and high expert guidance. Thus for those who are not really prepared as self-directed learners, quality distance education programs should begin the introductory courses and presentation of new fundamental knowledge with this stage of instructional design. In examining distance education, most courses feature these elements of instructional systems design. At

Stage One, the learner is focused upon incorporating the expertise of others and on memorizing and acknowledging the knowledge. However, beyond superficial retrieval the learner has not made meaningful connections without additional interactive stimulus.

Stages Two and Three reflect key elements of interaction between the learner and the learner's current world, use of critical thinking and reflective problem-solving, use of learning-how-to-learn skills and the development of self-directed behaviors (autonomy) and knowledge. The second stage would stimulate varied design models of actions and thinking through moderate instructor dominance and selected student autonomy and self-directed actions. The learner would be open to critical thinking through discussions of conflicting ideas applied to content settings. It would provide moderated group discussions and projects through the tutelage of the instructor. It would move the learner beyond the memorization of facts, to the application and evaluation of application of ideas.

Effective learning designs should begin to move adult learners beyond traditional course expectations of assigned reading, writing, memorizing, and testing. In the second stage, the learner needs to be given assignments which provide more learner activated design, implementation, and evaluation. In particular, alternative learning strategies which engage the learner in creation, exploration, and decision-making should be offered and supported. Moving the learner towards making meaning of subject content through the individual's experiences is important at this stage.

Further, evaluation and assessment should provide for more qualitative assessments and learner initiated evaluation.

In the third stage of high student autonomy and low instructor dominance, the learner would actively design the learning experience. These actions could include investigation of an area related to the topic from his or her own community. This involvement could incorporate consulting current formal and informal experts in the area, examining the current status of an aspect of the concept or topic, or consulting past history of the community as it interacts with the topic. It would also actively encourage the learner to be creative in developing his or her own learning project to further explore and understand the topics. Also in Stage Three, courses and learning experiences would be offered which maximized learner dominance. Although the instructor would still have an important role, the instructor's role would be a "facilitator" and co-instructor with the student. The instructor should not view this role as an abrogation of responsibilities or involvement. However, the learner must come to the relationship with his or her own set of needs, concerns for making of meaning, and action in relation to the course. Those needs and concerns with the recommended guidance of the instructor become the focus of the course structure and content. The learning strategies and evaluation process would be interactive between the learner and the instructor (or learning peer group) to establish external as well as internal criteria and insights into the process and outcome.

This figure and discussion will hopefully begin a dialogue between you, your instructors, and your adult learners regarding alternative design models and learning strategies to develop and enhance the learner's role of autonomy and self-directedness as part of the traditional distance and open learning system.

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FIGURE ONE

Stages of Teaching/Learning in Distance Education

Stage One **High Instructor Dominance, Low Student Autonomy**

Instructor-directed course with pre-designed activities
Focus on clear one-way communication
Concern for memorization and understanding
Lecture, recitation, dominance of written word
Focus on key learning objectives of basic content and skill
Concern for measured and observable learning outcomes

Stage Two **Moderate Instructor Dominance, Selected Student Autonomy and Self-directed Actions**

Skeletal structure with variable learning activities
Focus on communicating key ideas and learner ideas within the content
Concern for learner understanding and application
Variety of instructional tools/ methodologies to create learner interaction
Usage of learner involvement in providing examples and applications
Course provides guided learner-design opportunities
Concern for evaluation of understanding key ideas, for applications of course content, and concern for development of critical thinking and problem solving

Stage Three **Low Instructor Dominance, High Student Autonomy**

Course based on skeletal ideas and activities jointly determined by instructor and student, or student-group
Effectiveness based on learner with adequately developed learning skills and relevant conceptual background experiences
Learner focused on meta-cognitive learning skills with course content as a vehicle
Consultation with instructor as a facilitator
Learner is active as major designer, implementer, and evaluator of the learning experience
Usage of peer learning group, cooperative learning designs, learning journal, and action research/participatory research projects
Integration of andragogical principles, through use of learning contracts, learner mentor groupings.
Course evaluation is based in learner-defined criteria and outcomes in negotiation with instructor